

Vermont Communications (VCOMM) Board Meeting
May 21, 2009
Waterbury, VT

Present: Michael Manning, Al Barber, Heather Gibbs, Ken Morton, J. Paul Duquette, Doug Johnston, Ludwig Schumacher, Kristin Haas, Timothy Meehan, Walt Goodell, Jim Finger, Jim Bitting, Al Smith, Terry LaValley, Peter Kipp, Chris Herrick, Bill Burden, Robert Schell, Douglas Lawrence, Gene Perkins, Jake Elovirta, David Mace, Francis Aumand, James Leene

Start: 0937 hrs

Paul Duquette began the meeting with opening comments and a PowerPoint presentation. Information contained in the PowerPoint is not contained in these minutes; however, additional comments and information provided is. Terry LaValley mentioned the recent US-Canada Cross Border Interoperable Communications Workshop in Niagara Falls, NY and said that the FCC may waive the application fee for public safety entities. Paul Duquette said the Niagara Falls meeting was hopeful; Industry Canada (the Canadian counterpart to the FCC) was receptive to listening to U.S. challenges. Industry Canada agreed to do a study to determine what VHF frequencies along the border and above the A Line would not interfere with Canadian users. In the future Canada will not allow new licenses on frequencies close to the U.S. border that public safety entities are planning on using. Industry Canada will investigate who the users are that are interfering now and may try to reallocate the users if there are only a few. Industry Canada will try to come up with regional frequencies that can be used along the border.

Ludwig Schumacher gave credit to the VCOMM Operations Committee for creating the draft Standard Operating Procedures (SOP). The SOPs require two UHF and two VHF frequencies. In this scenario agency leads showing up on scene would have dual radios. Ludwig Schumacher requested comments and suggestions on the draft SOPs; they are posted on the VCOMM web site (www.dps.state.vt.us/vcomm).

Currently V-Tac1 is approved but this frequency will probably be used as V-Call. There is a need to secure a second VHF channel for the SOPs. There are currently no active applications for other channels. The other VHF national calling and tactical channels have been denied by the FCC and Industry Canada. The UHF and VHF national calling and tactical channels are programmed into first responder radios. These channels are still being used in other parts of the country even though Vermont has restrictions on their use near the border. Eighty-two percent of first responder organizations currently have these channels programmed in their radios. These channels were made available nationally; however, they were not previously coordinated with Canada. VCOMM will have to go back and reprogram first responders' radios once channels are identified. Canada does not have a mandate to narrowband and is doing so only in areas with high congestion; everywhere else wideband is used. This makes it difficult to obtain frequencies for operation. VCOMM is working closely with Industry Canada to try to clear some of the national calling and tactical channels, but this is a slow process.

Paul Duquette and Michael Manning discussed the Public Safety Interoperable Communications (PSIC) Grant Program and possibilities for match including the value of the state's microwave system and through a partnership with the Vermont Electric Power Company (VELCO). The PSIC grant period of performance currently ends in September, 2010 but may be extended two years.

The Board discussed the concept of a user fee system for the Lifeline. VCOMM is open to any suggestions for sustainability. Chris Herrick suggested asking the fire community for feedback. If they know they might have to pay, they will start talking to their legislators. Francis Aumand said that we have to be mindful of statutory authority in place that requires charge back for users in the absence of another funding source.

The meeting proceeded with around the room introductions including that of the Jim Bitting and Al Smith, members of VCOMM's Project Management Team. The Request for Proposals (RFP) for the VCOMM Lifeline was posted yesterday (Wednesday).

Paul Duquette mentioned previous dispatch studies conducted in the state and discussed the current focus on the law enforcement portion of dispatching. Walt Goodell said the biggest issue is looking at long term sustainability. Francis Aumand identified the cost of doing business either through user fees or other funding sources and Doug Johnston commented that the fee system needs to be balanced and fair. Paul Duquette said the four state Public Safety Answering Points (PSAP) will be evaluated first then the eastern side of the state will be looked at. Once the law enforcement portion of dispatching has been reviewed then EMS and fire will provide input before a report is provided to the legislature.

The RFP contains dates for vendor proposals and to begin work. A pre-proposal conference is set for June 3rd with site visits to follow. Realistically construction of the Lifeline will not begin until 2010 and may continue through a few building seasons. PSAP upgrades can be done anytime of the year.

Vermont was naïve at first with the national channels and was one of first states on the border to try to coordinate these frequencies. Historically applicants have never been allowed to talk to Industry Canada directly but now VCOMM has had several direct interactions and this is a significant achievement. Industry Canada has no requirement to give VCOMM the national calling and tactical channels but VCOMM is working closely with them to try and free up the spectrum. As result of the Niagara Falls a frequency assignment database is now available to everyone that shows 90% of licenses. Industry Canada will also include the call sign of the Canadian user that the frequency request would interfere with on license application rejections.

Break: 1115 – 1145 hrs

Peter Kipp (DI&I) will become involved with the independent review process now that the RFP is posted. The independent review process takes over 30 days and costs \$15,000 - \$20,000. Vendors will have to bid on independent review. Michael Manning will be the contact for this.

Terry LaValley said there will be a loss of coverage when the full conversion to narrowband occurs and there will be a cost to regain this coverage; this must be anticipated. The loss of coverage is determined by terrain and the noise floor. Hinesburg/Burlington area has lost 1/3 of their coverage. Wideband impact from Canada is another factor that has to be brought into play; we won't interfere with their systems, but theirs will interfere with ours. Jim Bitting commented on the importance of having an analog to digital migration plan. Enhancing the system may be less expensive than converting all of Vermont's users from analog to digital.

VCOMM will be putting together outreach for LEPCs 3 and 12 as requested.

End: 1202 hrs